

AN ESMERALDA OF ROCKY CANYON.

BY BRET HARTE.

IT is to be feared that the hero of this chronicle began life as an impostor. He was offered to the credulous and sympathetic family of a San Francisco citizen as a lamb, who, unless bought as a playmate for the children, would inevitably pass into the butcher's hands. A combination of refined sensibility and urban ignorance of nature prevented them from discerning certain glaring facts that betrayed his caprid origin. So a ribbon was duly tied round his neck, and in pleasing emulation of the legendary "Mary," he was taken to school by the confiding children. Here, alas! the fraud was discovered, and history was reversed by his being turned out by the teacher, because he was *not* "a lamb at school." Nevertheless, the kind-hearted mother of the family persisted in retaining him, on the plea that he might yet become "useful." To her husband's feeble suggestion of "gloves," she returned a scornful negative, and spoke of the weakly infant of a neighbor, who might later receive nourishment from this providential animal. But even this hope

was destroyed by the eventual discovery of his sex. Nothing remained now but to accept him as an ordinary kid, and to find amusement in his accomplishments—eating, climbing, and butting. It must be confessed that these were of a superior quality; a capacity to eat everything from a cambric handkerchief to an election poster, an agility which brought him even to the roof of houses, and a power of overturning by a single push the chubbiest child who opposed him, made him a fearful joy to the nursery. This last quality was incautiously developed in him by a negro boy-servant, who, later, was hurriedly propelled down a flight of stairs by his too proficient scholar. Having once tasted victory, "Billy" needed no further incitement to his performances. The small wagon which he sometimes consented to draw for the benefit of the children never hindered his attempts to butt the passer-by. On the contrary, on well-known scientific principles he added the impact of the bodies of the children projected over his head in his charge, and the infelicitous

pedestrian found himself not only knocked off his legs by Billy, but bombarded by the whole nursery.

Delightful as was this recreation to juvenile limbs, it was felt to be dangerous to the adult public. Indignant protestations were made, and as Billy could not be kept in the house, he may be said to have at last butted himself out of that sympathetic family and into a hard and unfeeling world. One morning he broke his tether in the small back yard. For several days thereafter he displayed himself in guilty freedom on the tops of adjacent walls and out-houses. The San Francisco suburb where his credulous protectors lived was still in a volcanic state of disruption, caused by the grading of new streets through rocks and sand hills. In consequence the roofs of some houses were on the level of the door-steps of others, and were especially adapted to Billy's performances. One afternoon, to the admiring and perplexed eyes of the nursery, he was discovered standing on the apex of a neighbor's new Elizabethan chimney, on a space scarcely larger than the crown of a hat, calmly surveying the world beneath him. High infantile voices appealed to him in vain; baby arms were out-

stretched to him in hopeless invitation; he remained exalted and obdurate, like Milton's hero, probably by his own merit "raised to that bad eminence." Indeed, there was already something Satanic in his budding horns and pointed mask as the smoke curled softly around him. Then he appropriately vanished, and San Francisco knew him no more. At the same time, however, one Owen McGinnis, a neighboring sand-hill squatter, also disappeared, leaving San Francisco for the southern mines, and he was said to have taken Billy with him—for no conceivable reason except for companionship. Howbeit it was the turning-point of Billy's career; such restraint as kindness, civilization, or even policemen had exercised upon his nature was gone. He retained, I fear, a certain wicked intelligence, picked up in San Francisco with the newspapers and theatrical and election posters he had consumed. He reappeared at Rocky Canyon among the miners as an exceedingly agile chamois, with the low cunning of a satyr. That was all that civilization had done for him!

If Mr. McGinnis had fondly conceived that he would make Billy "useful," as well as companionable, he was singularly



"BOMBARDED BY THE WHOLE NURSERY."

mistaken. Horses and mules were scarce in Rocky Canyon, and he attempted to utilize Billy by making him draw a small cart, laden with auriferous earth, from his claim to the river. Billy, rapidly gaining strength, was quite equal to the task, but, alas! not his inborn propensity.

An incautious gesture from the first passing miner Billy chose to construe into the usual challenge. Lowering his head, from which his budding horns had been already pruned by his master, he instantly went for his challenger—cart and all. Again the scientific law already pointed out prevailed. With the shock of the onset the entire contents of the cart arose and poured over the astonished miner, burying him from sight. In any other but a Californian mining-camp such a propensity in a draught animal would have been condemned, on account of the damage and suffering it entailed, but in Rocky Canyon it proved unprofitable to the owner from the very amusement and interest it excited.

Miners lay in wait for Billy with a "greenhorn," or new-comer, whom they would put up to challenge the animal by some indiscreet gesture. In this way hardly a cart-load of "pay gravel" ever arrived safely at its destination, and the unfortunate McGinnis was compelled to withdraw Billy as a beast of burden. It was whispered that so great had his propensity become, under repeated provocation, that McGinnis himself was no longer safe. Going ahead of his cart one day to remove a fallen bough from the trail, Billy construed the act of stooping into a playful challenge from his master—with the inevitable result.

The next day McGinnis appeared with a wheelbarrow, but without Billy. From that day he was relegated to the rocky crags above the camp, from whence he was only lured occasionally by the mis-

chievous miners, who wished to exhibit his peculiar performances. For although Billy had ample food and sustenance among the crags, he had still a civilized longing for posters; and whenever a circus, a concert, or a political meeting was "billed" in the settlement, he was on

hand while the paste was yet fresh and succulent. In this way it was averred that he once removed a gigantic theatre bill setting forth the charms of the "Sacramento Pet," and being caught in the act by the advance-agent, was pursued through the main street, carrying the damp bill on his horns, eventually affixing it, after his own peculiar fashion, on the back of Judge Boompointer, who was standing in front of his own court-house.

In connection with the visits of this young lady another story concerning Billy survives in the legends of Rocky Canyon. Colonel Starbottle was at that time passing through the settlement on election business, and it was part of his

chivalrous admiration for the sex to pay a visit to the pretty actress. The single waiting-room of the little hotel gave upon the veranda, which was also level with the street. After a brief yet gallant interview, in which he oratorically expressed the gratitude of the settlement with old-fashioned Southern courtesy, Colonel Starbottle lifted the chubby little hand of the "Pet" to his lips, and, with a low bow, backed out upon the veranda. But the Pet was astounded by his instant reappearance, and by his apparently casting himself passionately and hurriedly at her feet! It is needless to say that he was followed closely by Billy, who from the street had casually noticed him, and construed his novel exit into an ungentlemanly challenge.

Billy's visits, however, became less frequent, and as Rocky Canyon underwent



"ON THE APEX OF A NEIGHBOR'S NEW ELIZABETHAN CHIMNEY."

the changes incidental to mining settlements, he was presently forgotten in the invasion of a few Southwestern families, and the adoption of amusements less practical and turbulent than he had afforded. It was alleged that he was still seen in the more secluded fastnesses of the mountains, having reverted to a wild state, and it was suggested by one or two of the more adventurous that he might yet become edible, and a fair object of chase. A traveller through the Upper Pass of the canyon related how he had seen a savage-looking, hairy animal like a small elk perched upon inaccessible rocks, but always out of gunshot. But these and other legends were set at naught and overthrown by an unexpected incident.

The Pioneer Coach was toiling up the long grade towards Skinners Pass when Yuba Bill suddenly pulled up, with his feet on the brake.

"Jimminy!" he ejaculated, drawing a deep breath.

The startled passenger beside him on the box followed the direction of his eyes. Through an opening in the way-side pines he could see, a few hundred yards away, a cuplike hollow in the hill-side of the vividdest green. In the centre a young girl of fifteen or sixteen was dancing and keeping step to the castanet "click" of a pair of "bones," such as negro minstrels use, held in her hands above her head. But, more singular still, a few paces before her a large goat, with its neck roughly wreathed with flowers and vines, was taking ungainly bounds and leaps in imitation of its companion. The wild background of the Sierras, the pastoral hollow, the incongruousness of the figures, and the vivid color of the girl's red flannel petticoat showing beneath her calico skirt, that had been pinned around her waist, made a striking picture, which by this time had attracted all eyes. Perhaps the dancing of the girl suggested a negro "break-down" rather than any known sylvan measure; but all this, and even the clatter of the bones, was made gracious by the distance.

"Esmeralda! by the living Harry!" shouted the excited passenger on the box.

Yuba Bill took his feet off the brake, and turned a look of deep scorn upon his companion as he gathered the reins again.

"It's that blanked goat, outer Rocky Canyon beyond, and Polly Harkness! How did she ever come to take up with him?"

Nevertheless, as soon as the coach reached Rocky Canyon, the story was quickly told by the passengers, corroborated by Yuba Bill, and highly colored by the observer on the box-seat. Harkness was known to be a new-comer who



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lived with his wife and only daughter on the other side of Skinners Pass. He was a "logger" and charcoal-burner, who had eaten his way into the serried ranks of pines below the pass, and established in these efforts an almost unsurmountable cordon of fallen trees, stripped bark, and charcoal pits around the clearing where his rude log hut stood—which kept

his seclusion unbroken. He was said to be a half-savage mountaineer from Georgia, in whose rude fastnesses he had distilled unlawful whiskey, and that his tastes and habits unfitted him for civilization. His wife chewed and smoked; he was believed to make a fiery brew of his own from acorns and pine nuts; he seldom came to Rocky Canyon except for provisions; his logs were slipped down a "shoot" or slide to the river, where they voyaged once a month to a distant mill, but *he* did not accompany them. The daughter, seldom seen at Rocky Canyon, was a half-grown girl, brown as autumn fern, wild-eyed, dishevelled, in a homespun skirt, sun-bonnet, and boy's brogans. Such were the plain facts which sceptical Rocky Canyon opposed to the passengers' legends. Nevertheless, some of the younger miners found it not out of their way to go over Skinners Pass on the journey to the river—but with what success was not told. It was said, however, that a celebrated New York artist, making a tour of California, was on the coach one day going through the pass, and preserved the memory of what he saw there in a well-known picture entitled "Dancing Nymph and Satyr," said by competent critics to be "replete with the study of Greek life." This did not affect Rocky Canyon, where the study of mythology was presumably displaced by an experience of more wonderful flesh-and-blood people—but later it was remembered with some significance.

Among the improvements already noted, a zinc and wooden chapel had been erected in the main street, where a certain popular revivalist preacher of a peculiar Southwestern sect regularly held exhortatory services. His rude emotional power over his ignorant fellow-sectarians was well known, while curiosity drew others. His effect upon the females of his flock was hysterical and sensational. Women prematurely aged by frontier drudgery and child-bearing, girls who had known only the rigors and pains of a half-equipped, ill-nourished youth in their battling with the hard realities of nature around them, all found a strange fascination in the extravagant glories and privileges of the unseen world he pictured to them, which they might have found in the fairy-tales and nursery legends of civilized children—had they known them. Personally he was not at-

tractive; his thin pointed face, and bushy hair rising on either side of his square forehead in two rounded knots, and his long, straggling, wiry beard dropping from a strong neck and shoulders, were indeed of a common Southwestern type; yet in him they suggested something more. This was voiced by a miner who attended his first service, and as the Reverend Mr. Withholder rose in the pulpit, the former was heard to audibly ejaculate, "Dod blasted!—if it ain't Billy!" But when on the following Sunday, to everybody's astonishment, Polly Harkness, in a new white muslin frock and broadbrimmed Leghorn hat, appeared before the church door with the real Billy, and exchanged conversation with the preacher, the likeness was appalling.

I grieve to say that the goat was at once christened by Rocky Canyon as "The Reverend Billy," and the minister himself was Billy's "brother." More than that, when an attempt was made by outsiders, during the service, to inveigle the tethered goat into his old butting performances, and he took not the least notice of their insults and challenges, the epithet "blanked hypocrite" was added to his title.

Had he really reformed? Had his pastoral life with his nymphlike mistress completely cured him of his pugnacious propensity, or had he simply found it was inconsistent with his dancing, and seriously interfered with his "fancy steps"? Had he found tracts and hymn-books were as edible as theatre posters? These were questions that Rocky Canyon discussed lightly—although there was always the more serious mystery of the relations of the Reverend Mr. Withholder, Polly Harkness, and the goat towards each other. The appearance of Polly at church was no doubt due to the minister's active canvass of the districts. But had he ever heard of Polly's dancing with the goat? And where in this plain, angular, badly dressed Polly was hidden that beautiful vision of the dancing nymph which had enthralled so many? And when had Billy ever given any suggestion of his Terpsichorean abilities—before or since? Were there any "points" of the kind to be discerned in him now? None! Was it not more probable that the Reverend Mr. Withholder had himself been dancing with Polly, and been mistaken for the goat? Passengers who

could have been so deceived with regard to Polly's beauty, might have as easily mistaken the minister for Billy. About this time another incident occurred, which increased the mystery.

The only male in the settlement who apparently dissented from the popular opinion regarding Polly was a new-comer—Jack Filgee. While discrediting her performance with the goat—which he had never seen—he was evidently greatly prepossessed with the girl herself. Unfortunately he was equally addicted to drinking, and as he was exceedingly shy and timid when sober, and quite unrepresentable at other times, his wooing—if it could be so called—progressed but slowly. Yet when he found that Polly went to church, he listened so far to the exhortations of the Reverend Mr. Withholder as to promise to come to "Bible class" immediately after the Sunday service. It was a hot afternoon, and Jack, who had kept sober for two days, incautiously fortified himself for the ordeal by taking a drink before arriving. He was nervously early, and immediately took a seat in the empty church near the open door. The quiet of the building, the drowsy buzzing of flies, and perhaps the soporific effect of the liquor caused his eyes to close and his head to fall forward on his breast repeatedly. He was recovering himself for the fourth time when he suddenly received a violent cuff on the ear, and was knocked backward off the bench on which he was sitting. That was all he knew.

He picked himself up with a certain dignity, partly new to him, and partly the result of his condition, and staggered, somewhat bruised and dishevelled, to the nearest saloon. Here a few frequenters who had seen him pass, who knew his errand and the devotion to Polly which had induced it, exhibited a natural concern.

"How's things down at the gospel shop?" said one. "Look as ef you'd been wrastlin' with the Spirit, Jack!"

"Old man must hev exhorted pow'ful," said another, glancing at his disordered Sunday attire.

"Ain't be'n hevin' a row with Polly? I'm told she slings an awful left."

Jack, instead of replying, poured out a dram of whiskey, drank it, and putting down his glass, leaned heavily against the counter as he surveyed his questioners

with a sorrow chastened by reproachful dignity.

"I'm a stranger here, gentlemen," he said, slowly; "ye've known me only a little; but ez ye've seen me both blind drunk and sober, I reckon ye've caught on to my gin'ral gait! Now I wanter put it to you, ez far-minded men, ef you ever saw me strike a parson?"

"No," said a chorus of sympathetic voices. The barkeeper, however, with a swift recollection of Polly and the Reverend Withholder, and some possible contingent jealousy in Jack, added, prudently, "Not yet."

The chorus instantly added, reflectively, "Well, no; not yet."

"Did ye ever," continued Jack, solemnly, "know me to cuss, sass, bullyrag, or say anything agin parsons—or the church?"

"No," said the crowd, overthrowing prudence in curiosity, "ye never did—we swear it!—and now, what's up?"

"I ain't what you call 'a member in good standin','" he went on, artistically protracting his climax. "I ain't be'n convicted o' sin; I ain't a 'meek an' lowly follower'; I ain't be'n exactly what I orter be'n; I hev'n't lived anywhere up to my lights;—but is thet a reason why a parson should strike me?"

"Why? What? When did he? Who did?" asked the eager crowd with one voice.

Jack then painfully related how he had been invited by the Reverend Mr. Withholder to attend the Bible class. How he had arrived early, and found the church empty. How he had taken a seat near the door to be handy when the parson came. How he jest felt "kinder kam and good," listenin' to the flies buzzing, and must have fallen asleep—only he pulled himself up every time—though, after all, it warn't no crime to fall asleep in an empty church! How "all of a suddent" the parson came in, "give him a clip side o' the head," and knocked him off the bench, and left him there!

"But what did he say?" queried the crowd.

"Nuthin'. Afore I could git up, he got away."

"Are you sure it was him?" they asked.

"You know you say you was asleep."

"Am I sure?" repeated Jack, scornfully.

"Don't I know thet face and beard? Didn't I feel it hangin' over me?"

"What are you going to do about it?" continued the crowd eagerly.

"Wait till he comes out —and you 'll see," said Jack, with dignity.

This was enough for the crowd; they gathered excitedly at the door, where Jack was already standing, looking towards the church. The moments dragged slowly; it might be a long meeting. Suddenly the church door opened and a figure appeared, looking up and down the street. Jack colored — he recognized Polly — and stepped out into the road. The crowd delicately, but somewhat disappointedly, drew back in the saloon. They did not care to interfere in that sort of thing.

Polly saw him, and came hurriedly towards him. She was holding something in her hand.

"I picked this up on the church floor," she said shyly, "so I reckoned you had be'n there, — though the parson said you hadn't, — and I just excused myself and ran out to give it ye. It's yourn, ain't it?" She held up a gold specimen pin, which he had put on in honor of the occasion. "I had a harder time, though, to git this yer, —it's yourn too, — for Billy was laying down in the yard, back o' the church, and just comf'bly swallerin' it."

"Who?" said Jack quickly.

"Billy, — my goat."

Jack drew a long breath, and glanced back at the saloon. "Ye ain't goin' back to class now, are ye?" he said hurriedly. "Ef you ain't, I 'll —I 'll see ye home."

"I don't mind," said Polly demurely, "if it ain't takin' ye outer y'ur way."

Jack offered his arm, and hurrying past the saloon, the happy pair were soon on the road to Skinners Pass.

Jack did not, I regret to say, confess his blunder, but left the Reverend Mr. Withholder to remain under suspicion of having committed an unprovoked assault and battery. It was characteristic of Rocky Canon, however, that this suspicion, far from injuring his clerical reputation, incited a respect that had been hitherto denied him. A man who could hit out straight from the shoulder had, in the language of the critics, "suthin' in him." Oddly enough, the crowd that had at first sympathized with Jack now began to admit provocations. His subsequent silence, a disposition when questioned on the subject to smile inanely, and, later, when insidiously asked if he had ever seen Polly dancing with the goat,

his bursting into uproarious laughter completely turned the current of opinion against him.
The public mind,

however, soon became engrossed by a more interesting incident.

The Reverend Mr. Withholder had organized a series of Biblical tableaux at Skinnerstown for the benefit of his church. Illustrations were to be given of "Rebecca at the Well," "The Finding of Moses," "Joseph and his Brethren"; but Rocky Canyon was more particularly excited by the announcement that Polly Harkness would personate "Jephthah's Daughter." On the evening of the performance, however, it was found that this tableau had been withdrawn and another substituted, for reasons not given. Rocky Canyon, naturally indignant at this omission to represent native talent, indulged in a hundred wild surmises. But it was generally believed that Jack Filgee's revengeful animosity to the Reverend Mr. Withholder was at the bottom of it. Jack as usual smiled inanely, but nothing was to be got from him. It was not until a few days later, when another incident crowned the climax of these mysteries, that a full disclosure came from his lips.

One morning a flaming poster was displayed at Rocky Canyon with a charming picture of the "Sacramento Pet" in the briefest of skirts, disporting with a tambourine before a goat garlanded with flowers, who bore, however, an undoubted likeness to Billy. The text in enormous letters and bristling with points of admiration stated that the "Pet" would appear as "Esmeral-

da," assisted by a performing goat, especially trained by the gifted actress. The goat would dance, play cards, and perform those tricks of magic familiar to the readers of Victor Hugo's beautiful story of the *Hunchback of Notre Dame*, and finally knock down and overthrow the designing seducer, Captain Phœbus. The marvellous spectacle would be produced under the patronage of the Hon. Colonel Starbottle and the Mayor of Skinnerstown.

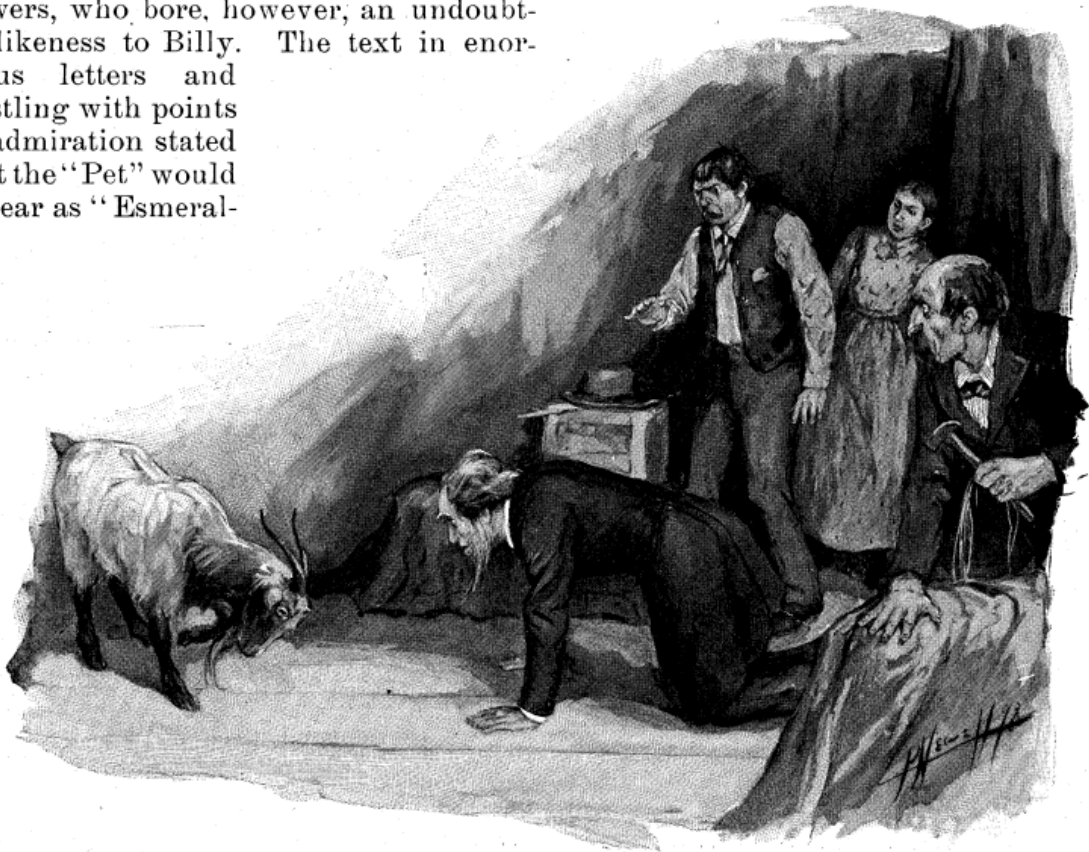
As all Rocky Canyon gathered open-mouthed around the poster, Jack demurely joined the group. Every eye was turned upon him.

"It don't look as if yer Polly was in *this* show, any more than she was in the tablovs," said one, trying to conceal his curiosity under a slight sneer. "She don't seem to be doin' any dancin'!"

"She never *did* any dancin'," said Jack, with a smile.

"Never *did*! Then what was all these yarns about her dancin' up at the pass?"

"It was the Sacramento Pet who did all the dancin'; Polly only *lent* the goat. Ye see, the Pet kinder took a shine to Billy arter he bowled Starbottle over thet



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day at the hotel, and she thought she might teach him tricks. So she *did*, doing all her teachin' and stage-rehearsin' up there at the pass, so's to be outer sight, and keep this thing dark. She bribed Polly to lend her the goat and keep her secret, and Polly never let on a word to anybody but me."

"Then it was the Pet that Yuba Bill saw dancin' from the coach?"

"Yes."

"And that yer artist from New York painted as an 'Imp and Satire'?"

"Yes."

"Then that's how Polly didn't show up in them tablows at Skinnerstown? It was Withholder who kinder smelt a rat, eh? and found out it was only a theayter gal all along that did the dancin'?"

"Well, you see," said Jack, with affected hesitation, "thet's another yarn. I don't know mebbe ez I oughter tell it. Et ain't got anything to do with this advertisement o' the Pet, and might be rough on old man Withholder! Ye mustn't ask me, boys."

But there was that in his eye, and above all in this lazy procrastination of the true humorist when he is approaching his climax, which rendered the crowd clamorous and unappeasable. They *would* have the story!

Seeing which, Jack leaned back against a rock with great gravity, put his hands in his pockets, looked discontentedly at the ground, and began: "You see, boys, old Parson Withholder had heard all these yarns about Polly and the trick-goat, and he kinder reckoned thet she might do for some one of his tablows. So he axed her if she'd mind standin' with the goat and a tambourine for Jephthah's Daughter, at about the time when old Jeph comes home, sailin' in and vowin' he'll kill the first thing he sees—jest as it is in the Bible story. Well, Polly didn't like to say it wasn't *her* that performed with the goat, but the Pet, for thet would give the Pet dead away; so Polly agrees to come thar with the goat and rehearse the tablow. Well, Polly's thar, a little shy; and Billy—you bet *he's* all there, and ready for the fun; but the darned fool who plays Jephthah ain't worth shucks, and when *he* comes in he does nothin' but; at Polly and seem skeert at the goat. This makes old Withholder

jest wild, and at last he goes on the platform hisself to show them how the thing oughter be done. So he comes bustlin' and prancin' in, and ketches sight o' Polly dancin' in with the goat to welcome him; and then he clasps his hands—so—and drops on his knees, and hangs down his head—so—and sez, 'Me chyld! me vow! Oh, heavens!' But jest then Billy—who's gettin' rather tired o' all this foolishness—kinder slues round on his hind legs, and ketches sight o' the parson!" Jack paused a moment, and thrusting his hands still deeper in his pockets, said, lazily, "I don't know if you fellers have noticed how much old Withholder looks like Billy?"

There was a rapid and impatient chorus of "Yes! yes!" and "Go on!"

"Well," continued Jack, "when Billy sees Withholder kneelin' thar with his head down, he gives a kind o' joyous leap and claps his hoofs together, ez much ez to say, 'I'm on in this scene,' drops his own head, and jest lights out for the parson!"

"And butts him clean through the side scenes into the street," interrupted a delighted auditor.

But Jack's face never changed. "Ye think so?" he said, gravely. "But thet's jest whar ye slip up; and thet's jest whar Billy slipped up!" he added, slowly. "Mebbe ye've noticed, too, thet the parson's built kinder solid about the head and shoulders. It mought hev be'n thet, or thet Billy didn't get a fair start, but thet goat went down on his fore legs like a shot, and the parson give one heave, and jest scooted him off the platform! Then the parson reckoned thet this yer 'tablow' had better be left out—as thar didn't seem to be any other man who could play Jephthah, and it wasn't dignified for *him* to take the part. But the parson allowed thet it might be a great moral lesson to Billy!"

And it *was*—for from that moment Billy never attempted to butt again. He performed with great docility later on in the Pet's engagement at Skinnerstown; he played a distinguished rôle throughout the provinces; he had had the advantages of Art from "the Pet," and of Simplicity from Polly, but only Rocky Canyon knew that his real education had come with his first rehearsal with the Reverend Mr. Withholder.